

A law in India leads to protests and a tussle over Gandhi

NEW DELHI

BY MARIA ABI-HABIB

The protesters who are challenging Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-centric vision for India liberally evoke the legacy of a national icon: Mohandas K. Gandhi, who wanted a country where Hindus and Muslims lived together and a secular government kept the peace.

So it has been galling for them to watch Mr. Modi and his allies claim Gandhi's mantle to promote their own agenda, including the issue that set off the protests — a citizenship law that critics say blatantly discriminates against Muslims.

With Thursday the 72nd anniversary of Gandhi's assassination, Mr. Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party have deployed his name and image at an ever-faster clip in an information campaign meant to counter the protests and drum up support for the citizenship law.

"We only implemented what the great freedom fighters had wished to do. We have done Gandhiji's bidding," Mr. Modi said this month in defense of the law, adding a Hindi suffix indicating respect.

But the protesters say that the government's actions are at odds with Gandhi's goal of a secular, pluralistic India.

Since his landslide re-election in May, Mr. Modi has made several bold moves that thrilled Indians who long for a Hindu state. He canceled the statehood of the predominantly Muslim territory of Kashmir, and thousands were arrested there without charge. His party championed a court ruling that allowed a Hindu temple to be built on the site of a centuries-old mosque, touching on a dangerous sectarian flash point.

And now the party has pushed through the citizenship law, which favors immigrants of every major South Asian religion but Islam. Critics fear

that if the law were combined with a citizenship test, Muslims could be disenfranchised, stripped of their nationality or their right to vote.

"Modi invokes everything about Gandhi except Hindu-Muslim harmony, and this was the most crucial element of his work," said Ramachandra Guha, a historian who wrote an authoritative biography of Gandhi, and who was arrested at a recent protest.

"You can't have Einstein without relativity," Mr. Guha said. "You can't have Darwin without evolution. And you can't have Gandhi without Hindu-Muslim harmony."

Clashes broke out at some early protests, but more recent demonstrations have been peaceful, deliberately drawing on Gandhi's example of nonviolent resistance. The government has responded with both force and a virulent disinformation campaign. (Officials have denied cracking down on peaceful protests, despite many images and witness accounts of violence.)

In recent days, a protest camp of hundreds of women in the Shaheen Bagh neighborhood of New Delhi has come to symbolize the movement. Officials have said the women are radicals or have been paid to be there, and many believe a police crackdown is imminent.

Throughout his six years in power, Mr. Modi has frequently linked himself to Gandhi's legacy, saying he was "made of the same soil" as the champion of Indian independence. His vice president has called it "divine coincidence" that both men were born in the state of Gujarat. Mr. Modi has even used Gandhi's signature round, wire-rimmed spectacles as a logo for his "Clean India" sanitation campaign.

Mr. Modi has also drawn on Gandhi's globally resonant image overseas as he cuts military alliances and trade deals. In October, as he wrapped up meetings at the United Nations General Assem-



A protest this month in Prayagraj, formerly Allahabad, against India's new citizenship law. The poster at left is of Mohandas K. Gandhi.

bly, he wrote an Opinion piece for The New York Times calling on the world to learn from Gandhi's teachings.

But one fact omitted by the prime minister was that Gandhi was killed by a Hindu nationalist — a man nurtured by the same hard-line ideological group that shaped Mr. Modi: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

The assassin, Nathuram Godse, believed that Gandhi had betrayed Hindus by being too conciliatory to Muslims. That line is still echoed today by Mr. Modi's party, the Bharatiya Janata

Party, which is filled with officials who revere Godse and see Gandhi as a traitor.

One party official, Pragya Singh Thakur, who has repeatedly called Godse a patriot, was arrested in 2008 in connection with a mosque bombing that killed 10 people. Mr. Modi's government dropped some of the most serious terrorism charges against her, and she was elected to Parliament in an overwhelming victory last year.

"The ideology that killed him is now trying to claim him," said Tushar Gan-

dhi, a great-grandson of Gandhi who has supported the protests.

"It's nauseating to see them snatch my great-grandfather's legacy, but at the same time I take pride that even a person like Modi must seek refuge in a person like my great-grandfather," Mr. Gandhi said.

Mr. Modi's party is hardly the first Indian political group to evoke Gandhi's image for its own gain. His portrait hangs everywhere, and most Indians proudly revere him as a model of morality and conscience. For Mr. Modi, culti-

vating the association helps him attract Indian voters who have traditionally been wary of his party's sectarianism.

A pamphlet recently distributed by the party, addressing what it calls "misinformation" about the citizenship law, features Gandhi's image along with a quote from him appearing to suggest that he would have supported the law.

But the quote — about India welcoming Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan — is taken out of context, and critics contend that it is actually itself misinformation. Originally, Gandhi was excoriating Hindus who questioned Muslims' loyalty to India.

In scenes reminiscent of Gandhi's struggle against British rule, protesters have been dragged from auto rickshaws as they arrived at demonstrations. Police officers have charged at people who were marching peacefully.

The protest movement lacks the international support that gave Gandhi's campaign strength. But demonstrators are still clinging to their cause — and to Gandhi's methods.

In Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi, hundreds of women have braved the winter cold to shut down one of India's busiest thoroughfares, sleeping on thin sheets of cardboard. They began fasting this month, to demonstrate against the citizenship law and to pay tribute to the last weeks of Gandhi's life, when he went without food to protest the sectarian violence roiling India and Pakistan.

"It's painful to us that Gandhi was protesting against a foreign occupation power and we now need to use these tactics against our own government, an Indian government," said Saima Khan, 33.

She added that Gandhi had fought and died for an India where Muslims felt at home, an ideal that was now under threat.

Kai Schultz, Hari Kumar, Sameer Yasir and Suhasini Raj contributed reporting.